

Approximately 136km west of Brisbane, Australia, lies the sleepy little township of Oakey, home to the only Military Working Dog (MWD) unit in the Australian Army. Oakey is a rural location, which is prone to climatic extremes rarely experienced in Queensland. Temperatures can soar to 40 degrees Celsius in summer, and plummet to minus 8 degrees Celsius in winter. These climatic conditions, coupled with the arid landscape, make for an ideal training ground for MWDs.

The unit was formed in 1977, and comprised of five personnel from different military training backgrounds. They were categorised as Security Guards, and trained the Army's first Police Dogs. Their role was to provide security for the aircraft and buildings of the Army Aviation Centre. In 1999, the Defence Force recognised a greater potential for these dogs, and they were re-classified as MWDs, and are currently utilised in a role not dissimilar to the Vietnam Tracking Dogs.

The current breed of choice is the German Shepherd, although the Belgium Malinois is also being trialed. The public donates the majority of these dogs, with few of them having any pedigree status. Whilst it can be argued that several other breeds of dogs would be better suited to the tasks, the German Shepherd has proven to be an exceptional multi-purpose asset.

Potential dogs must satisfy selection criteria in order to qualify for recruitment. Some of the characteristics assessed are: reaction to gunfire, prey drive, agility, courage and physiological soundness. The failure rate of this assessment is staggering, although it should be highlighted that approximately 70% of the dogs that pass the recruitment test subsequently qualify and graduate.

Upon recruitment, dogs and handlers attend a 14-week training course. The handlers are introduced to dog psychology, animal husbandry and physiology, dog obedience, attack work and man-trailing (tracking). The handlers are then required to demonstrate their understanding of this instruction by training their designated dogs. Unlike some defence institutions, this team will remain together indefinitely. This ensures a strong bond between dog and handler, and dramatically improves their professionalism and proficiency.

Graduating teams are then posted to Oakey, where they receive intensive one-on-one training and guidance from senior handlers. The team's proficiency level is assessed every month. This allows training deficiencies to be recognised and addressed, and ensures the team develops expediently. Generally speaking, the team will attain an acceptable level of proficiency 6 - 12 months after graduation. The dogs are taught basic obedience, agility, attack work, building search and man-trailing.

There are two distinct roles the MWD capability is utilised for, which can be loosely categorised as airfield security and fieldwork.



44TH MILITARY POLICE PLATOON, MILITARY WORKING DOGS

ARMY AVIATION CENTRE, OAKEY, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

With the current state of world unrest, the field role has taken precedence, with numerous teams having deployed to East Timor to date. The MWDs are accommodated in permanent, cement-floored kennels, and are fed a diet of dry dog food. Due to ration restrictions, this diet regimen is the most reliable for maintenance of coat, teeth and general health.

Whilst employed in Australia, the teams provide security for the airfield, aircraft and

buildings located on the Army Aviation Centre. Handlers are also required to perform Military Police duties, such as discipline patrols, traffic control and minor criminal investigations. They are also required to perform two hours of continuation training each shift. The unit is divided into three teams; FlyAway Team 1 (FAT 1), FAT 2 and Airfield Security Section. All teams, regardless of employment, are required to maintain the fieldcraft aspect of their training, as all personnel rotate through each of these sections.

The MWD teams employed in East Timor have learnt many lessons during their deployment. The mountainous terrain and extremely dry or humid climate has meant lengthy

acclimatisation periods for both dogs and handlers. Once this is achieved, the MWDs are employed in various roles, including; tracking/pursuit of fleeing militia, crowd control at food distribution points, riot control at local market places, VIP protection for Tour De Force musical artists, Observation Posts, and proactive village patrols.

A large abundance of animals roam freely within the local villages, including goats, pigs, chickens, and dogs. These dogs are of indiscriminate breed, although predominantly have the appearance of the Australian Dingo. They are generally in poor condition, and are a third of the size of our dogs, and 20 kg lighter. Their poor condition is perplexing, as they form a large part of the local diet. One can only imagine the 'banquet' the locals envisage when we patrol through their village! The local children, however, are eager to have their photos taken with the "Asu B'ot" - "Big Dogs!"

Dog enthusiasts around the world will be pleased to learn that our dogs accompany us home! This is achieved through a stringent worming, inoculation and documentation process, instigated by the Australian Quarantine Inspection Services (AQIS), and maintained by the handlers. The dogs receive Doxycycline medication daily, Flea & Tick bath every 4 days and Flea and Tick pipettes each fortnight, all-wormer medication monthly, and receive a 12-month Heartworm preventative inoculation prior to deployment. Handlers follow these protocols fastidiously.

The Military Working Dog capability has been showcased to the Australian Defence Force, through the Timor Leste deployment. Through determination, professionalism and pride, these teams have earned the respect of both the locals and the defence personnel, and have highlighted the long-forgotten value and versatility of that truly exceptional animal ...

THE DOG

SERGEANT IAN HODGES



National Dog - The RingLEADER Way

